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SUBJECT: DARIEN ACTIVITY UPDATE

CLASSIFIED BY: STEPHENSON, AMB; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

FAST Team added to the mix

¶1. (S/NF) Embassy Panama is advancing on many fronts in our Darien strategy to deny the FARC and other Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) safehaven in the Darien. Built around our 1207 funding request, the strategy now includes significant additional resources from SOUTHCOM, JIATF-South, and DEA that have been structured to support the overall goal of the strategy. Post is particularly pleased about DEA's dedication of one of their FAST teams (Foreign-deployed Advisory and Support Team) to Panama to begin direct counter-narcotics missions in the Darien and other areas of Panama. This team will work in the Darien with Panamanian law-enforcement elements to develop sources, evaluate the drug routes and flow through the region, and support direct law enforcement action to seize narcotics and arrest traffickers. The team will also evaluate the possibility of carrying out a joint arrest mission against FARC 57th Front Deputy Commander Luis Fernando Mora-Pestana, aka "Silver", indicted in U.S. Federal Courts for kidnapping an AmCit, and for material support for a terrorist organization. Four FAST team members are in Panama now working with the Country Team to define their mandate and examine existing intelligence. Post has set up an inter-agency working group to ensure seamless cooperation in the complex intelligence and logistical challenges the mission will present.

¶2. (S//NF) Country Team has decided that the FAST team should initially concentrate on breaking the drug trafficking routes through the Darien, which have grown exponentially in importance during the last few months. There are growing indications that DTOs are storing large amounts of drugs on Panamanian soil, as indicated by a recent 2.5 ton seizure on the Caribbean coast, and the discovery of GPS on a captured go-fast with what are believed to be the coordinates of stash sites. The Gulf of San Miguel in Darien has become a central node of drug trafficking activity in the country, and the FAST team will give the DEA the capacity to extend its activities into the Darien in a more aggressive manner, and also provide the GOP with an end-game capacity it lacks in such remote areas.

SEAL Training

13. (S//NF) Post's Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) is supporting this initiative by having the Counter-Narco Terrorism Training Team (CNT), manned by SEALs from Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH), shift its training mission to a select group of the GOP National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) elite Reconnaissance Unit. This group would then work with the FAST team on counter-narcotics missions and on any possible High Value Target arrest mission. This will entail giving this group more high level training, and pushing the SEALs (who, along with other U.S. military trainers, were banned from entering the Darien just two years ago) deeper into the area. In keeping with their mandate as trainers, the SEALs will not participate directly in operations. SENAFRONT has also received training for the last two years from a SOUTHCOM Joint Planning Assistance Training (JPAT) team that regularly deploys to the Darien. This unit, which was the first group of uniformed trainers to enter the Darien, is focused on basic skills (medical, communications, logistics, maintenance and basic planning).

MIST

14. (S//NF) ODC also has a SOCSOUTH Military Information Support Team (MIST) in Panama to support Post's Darien strategy. This team has conducted a psyop campaign in the Darien in support of SENAFRONT, encouraging voluntary demobilization of FARC members and offering rewards for information leading to the capture of key FARC 57th Front leaders, including Silver.

Civil Affairs

15. (S//NF) Post is also awaiting the deployment of Civil Affairs elements from SOUTHCOM. The initial team of up to three planners will be sent to assist the GOP elements in charge of the government's activities in the Darien, both in Panama City and in La Palma, the capital of Darien. Together with a planner in the Embassy, they will provide a tremendous boost to the GOP, which historically is not good at strategic planning and has no recent counter-insurgency experience, while also giving the Embassy Darien Working Group day-to-day visibility on the GOP's efforts.

16. (S//NF) In the near future, Post expects to welcome a civil affairs team that will be able to accompany GOP officials and 1207 contractors deep into the Darien to assure that GOP and 1207-funded activities are following best practice learned in recent counter-insurgency operations, to prevent efforts from losing their focus on reducing the ability of the FARC and DTOs to operate in the Darien.

Beyond the Horizon

17. (S//NF) SOUTHCOM will have significant military personnel in the Darien from April to September of this year executing humanitarian assistance exercises, "Beyond the Horizon," and "New Horizon" (reprogrammed from Paraguay). These exercises will consist of Medical Readiness Training Exercises (MEDRETES) and engineering projects, including construction of schools and health clinics by U.S. military personnel. This could entail the presence of U.S. helicopters in the province for the first time, and will probably represent the largest U.S. military presence in the Darien in 20

years. Post is tying this opportunity into our 1207 strategy, as it will provide direct benefits to the population, while increasing the GOP's comfort factor with having U.S. forces in the Darien. Post believes this will make it easier in the future to get permission for air assets to operate in the Darien, as may be required in support of the operations mentioned above.

GOP Coordination

18. (S//NF) The Ambassador has met twice with Minister of the Presidency Jimmy Papadimitriu to push for robust GOP efforts to provide better governance in the Darien, and has raised the issue repeatedly with Vice President/Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Varela. The Government is committed to working with us, but due to the lack of any real security or development experts in the government, Post is seeking a highly competent lower level official to take the lead. Danna Harrick, Secretary General of the National Council of Sustainable Development (an IADB-funded economic development
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investment organization in the Ministry of the Presidency, which has worked extensively in the Darien), is emerging as a likely candidate. Harrick has identified a preexisting development strategy for the Darien, that was completed last year. The plan, which Harrick estimates would require \$25 million in funding and close inter-agency coordination to succeed, is being analyzed now in the Embassy and the GOP.
STEPHENSON